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## The Desirability of Social Desirability: More than a Response Set, Response Style, or Disposition?

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**Abstract.** This article describes some of the more significant denotations of social desirability and discusses the construct as boon or bane for political psychological researchers.

Social desirability has had at least several denotations in the history of psychological assessment. The construct has referred to (1) a manner of responding to assessment items irrespective of the congruence of the meaning of those items with their applicability to the individual's behavior, self-perceptions, or self-concept. Here the individual would answer every question in a manner compatible to what that individual considers to be socially acceptable, attractive, or consensual. This response set is one of many that could include answering randomly or "true" or "false" to every question. In addition, the construct has referred to (2) a manner of responding to assessment items that is characteristic of that individual's impression management strategies but may not necessarily be considered part of that individual's personality. Depending on theoretical orientation, one might consider this response style to be indicative of a persona or a preferred strategy in dealing with the world without the "depth" or significance of a personality trait. Moreover, the construct has referred to (3) a disposition or personality trait. Here, the affinity for being seen and being socially desirable is an important component of personality structure.

The psychological assessor attempting to develop reliable and valid assessment instruments would view social desirability as a boon or bane depending on which of the above denotations is considered valid. Social desirability as a response set often would be considered an error factor to be minimized--rarely as something interesting about the individual warranting further exploration. Social desirability as a response style would often be considered an error factor to be minimized--more often than as a response set as something interesting about the individual warranting further exploration. Social desirability as a disposition would most often be considered as something significant about an individual to be used as part of demonstrating adequate convergent or divergent validity for the instrument being developed.

One infrequently discussed aspect of social desirability affecting all three denotations is that what is socially desirable can change through time just as the degree of social desirability manifested by an individual can change. This change presents challenges in continuing to demonstrate reliable and valid measures of social desirability. In turn, these difficulties are impediments to developing measures--authoritarianism or sensation seeking--that may have significant consequences for political cognitions and behavior.

In conclusion, not only may the desirability of social desirability change through time but also the desirability of what is considered to be socially desirable. In essence, social desirability is more than a response set, response style, or disposition. It also can form an index of social value. (See Chen, P.Y., Dai, T., Spector, P.E., & Jex, S.M. (1997.) Relation between negative affectivity and positive affectivity: Effects of judged desirability of scale items and respondents' social desirability. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 69, 183-198; Crowne, D.P., & Marlowe, D. (1960.) A new scale of social desirability independent of psychopathology. *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 24, 349-354; Edwards, A.L. (1990.)

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Construct validity and social desirability. *American Psychologist*, 45, 287-290; McCrae, R.R., & Costa, P.T., Jr. (1983.) Social desirability scales: More substance than style. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 51, 882-888.) (Keywords: Personnel Security; Psychological Assessment; Typology.)